

Granite City Steel: And the Founding of Granite City, Illinois

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Among the many German immigrants who came to St. Louis in the 1850s were the Niedringhaus brothers, Frederick G., age 18, and William F., age 20, natives of Westphalia, Germany. They became tinnern and earned four dollars a week, selling their products on the street. By 1857, they had saved enough money to open their own business called St. Louis Stamping Works. While vacationing in Europe, William saw kitchen utensils that were coated with a glossy white element called graniteware. For \$5,000, William was able to purchase the process of making graniteware. It was called graniteware because the basic material used is ground granite. Imported sheet iron from Wales was also used in the production of graniteware. After the mill in Wales was destroyed by fire, the brothers constructed the Granite Iron Rolling Mills in 1878 and made their own sheet iron.

There was such a tremendous increase in business, they made plans to expand. There were two possible courses that they could take. They could build additions to the plants already operating in St. Louis. Or, they could build a new plant on cheap land near St. Louis where they could develop a new city. In August 1891, William and his son, George, took a ferry across the Mississippi River and came to a little farming community in Illinois called Kinderhook. They found many advantages in this location, including an abundant water supply, cheap electric power, moderate taxes, good roads, and lots of shipping facilities by railroad and by river. Next the Niedringhauses employed Mark

Henson, the village school teacher, as their land agent and they purchased 3,500 acres of this land located across the Mississippi River in Illinois.

Some members of the Niedringhaus family wished to name the city “Niedringhaus,” but the brothers felt it should have a more simple name. They chose Granite City, after the graniteware which was the basis for their company. It was not until the Niedringhauses selected the site that the area changed from a farming district to an industrial district.

In 1884, construction workers invaded the fields and began the construction of the new factory, Granite City Steel Works and also their other company called St. Louis Stamping Works. At the time, the Granite City plants were the largest manufacturing plants of their kind in the world. Gradually, the outline of the city emerged. The streets were laid out in an ordinary fashion. Fourteen thousand trees were planted, sidewalks put down, the streets graded, and water was provided. A section was set aside for a park, free sites were given for churches and schools. The company built a hundred brick homes with enough space that could be used for gardens. Industrial sites were to be along the right of way of three railroads on the west.

The founders also believed that Granite City should not be a one-industry city. To get rid of the danger that the failure of the industry would ruin the town and drive people away, the brothers and their successors, brought into Granite City other industries and other plants. This helped in developing a well diversified town.

Granite City Steel Works was later incorporated as Granite City Steel Company. During both world wars it was one of the firms that helped the defense of the country by rolling the critically needed heavy plate steel for the ships. In 1971, Granite City Steel

Company became a division of National Steel Corporation. In 2003, United States Steel became the new owners of Granite City Steel. Even with the ownership changes, production has continued uninterrupted to this very day. Their products have gone from graniteware pots of the late 1800s to the highly polished galvanized coils of the 2000s.

Granite City originated with two brothers, a vision, and a need to expand. The town along with the company has survived floods, world wars, a great depression, and economic adjustments. I also have personally benefited from this company. I have lived in Granite City all of my life which is here as a result of Granite City Steel. My grandfather retired from Granite City Steel after working there over 30 years. He is very proud to have worked there and been able to provide for his family all of those years. My other grandfather and my dad both used to work at Granite City Steel. I currently have two uncles who are employed at Granite City Steel. Granite City Steel has provided many jobs for our community. It has also given us a city where many people can live and grow with their families. I am grateful to have benefited so much from the people who founded Granite City Steel and Granite City. [From R. Beuttenmuller, *The Granite City Steel Company*; *Granite City, A Pictorial History*; *History of Granite City Steel*. . . *Since 1878*; and United States Steel Corporation, “About United States Steel Corporation,”

www.ussteel.com (Sept. 27, 2005).]